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## Origins, Race and Ethnicity: Transnational Adoptive Parenting and Belonging in Flanders, Belgium

Dominant adoption research in Belgium, as in many other European countries, has tended to focus almost exclusively on adoptive children's adjustment and attachment issues from a psycho-medical point of view, rather than on social factors. Moreover, although research by white adoptive parents tends to be over-represented in adoption research, adoptive parenting work in general and practices of engaging in the child's birth country in particular remain relatively understudied in Belgium and elsewhere. Furthermore,

only a few studies have touched upon the relationship between adoptive parenting practices and citizenship. Although some researchers have recently begun addressing parents' attempts to connect to their children's birth country, the complex web of imaginations and ideologies that fuel these practices needs further exploration and theorization.

By exploring how adoptive parents both normalize and problematize their children's and families' perceived difference; and examining what work is done

and imaginations are drawn upon in relation to that difference, we can gain insight into how racial, cultural and genetic diversity is metabolized within the so-called private realm of the family. Based within a feminist and constructivist anthropological epistemology, the thesis explores the parents' identity work, for themselves, and on behalf of their children, and examines the citizenship potential of adoptive parents' parenting work.

This text draws on an ethnographic study of cultural practices of adoption

and qualitative interviews with Flemish parents who have adopted children from Ethiopia, carried out from 2008 to 2011 for my PHD-project. Fifty-five (including prospective) adoptive mothers and fathers were interviewed and conversations with social workers involved in the adoption procedure were conducted. An additional thirty participant observation sessions were carried out during adoptive parents' information sessions and festive and charity events. My experiences of being an adoptive mother of a child from Ethiopia facilitated entering the field and constituted an important source of practical knowledge.

The participating parents come from diverse backgrounds (working in diverse professions, living in both cities and rural areas, unbelieving or Catholic), yet are predominantly middle-class, (highly) educated, white, heterosexual and married. A minority of the mothers were single at the time of the interviews or engaged in a lesbian relationship. The motives for adopting a child varied, from infertility or illness, to the wish for 'helping an orphaned child'. Their number of chil-

dren ranged from one to six and several families had both children by birth and by adoption. Their children's age varied from a few months to twenty-five years old, although the majority of the families had small children. All families adopted through a state recognized adoption agency and followed a stringent adoption procedure prescribed by the Belgian Federal and Flemish community authorities.

The ethnographic approach used in this study is theoretically underpinned by feminist and constructivist anthropological epistemologies which posit human reality as socially constructed and argue that knowledge production can only be obtained through shared social experience, depended upon the researcher's intellectual and embodied social positioning. This reflexive approach to ethnography denies a single interpretive truth or a pre-established ontological entity that can be revealed, but takes a view of knowledge as situated.

The research draws from postcolonial feminist studies and critical race studies, including whiteness studies, which understand concepts like race



*El bosque quemado (Burnt forest)*

and identity not only as continuously produced and reproduced, but also as embedded in power structures. Furthermore, findings from critical kinship, family and motherhood studies, and more specifically, feminist postcolonial and anthropological understandings of Western family ideologies and cultures of relatedness have been important for my analyses. Last but not least, I draw

on conceptualizations of citizenship as developed by critical citizenship studies during the last two decades. These studies have pointed out that citizenship is not just about access to formal rights, but also about recognition and full participation. These critiques have emphasized the dialogical and relational aspects of citizenship and its inflection by a range of social and cultural factors such as identity, social status, cultural presuppositions and belonging. Furthermore, feminist critiques also revealed the citizenship potential of practices that are relegated to the so-called private sphere.

The critical theoretical perspective adopted by this research does not imply a critique of the parenting practices of individual mothers and fathers, nor of the work of individual people who are professionally involved in the process of preparation and support of adoptive families. Yet, it aims to lay bare some of the unquestioned and accepted notions and axioms that undergird prevailing adoption discourse and practice, but that may be the very cause of the feelings of non-belonging, exclusion, and inferiority that many

adoptees are said to struggle with. By deconstructing so-called truths that guide adoption policy and unmasking their contingency and social and cultural constructedness, it aims at destabilizing and de-fatalizing reigning ideas in adoption that dramatize and pathologize the adoptees' condition, while these ideas at the same time disregard or downplay the poten-

tial effect of an ideological framework that situates adoptees outside 'real' belonging.

### **Adoptive parenting as an intensive practice**

The economy of information that is organized for selecting, training and supporting adoptive parents in Flanders are informed by insights from psychological theories that are disseminated among and reproduced by adoptive parents. They are exemplary of what Foucault calls 'governmentality'. By this term, Foucault refers to 'the regularities of everyday existence that structure the "conduct of conduct"'. Foucault uses the term 'biopower' to refer to a technology of self-discipline that since the late eighteenth century penetrates the most intimate domains of life. 'Technologies of normalization' create divides between groups of 'normal' people who can manage their own risks and 'targeted populations' who require intervention. 'Positive knowledges and expertises of truth' associated with the 'psy sciences' have played a very important role

*La lluna (The moon)*





*Ombres (Shadows)*

in the making of governable and self-governing subjects.

In current dominant adoption discourse, adoptive children and adoptive families are construed as a 'targeted population' in contrast to 'normal' children and 'natural' families. What Howell calls 'psycho-technocrat' experts such as educationalists, child therapists and social workers, enhance the 'authority of psychological explanations for behaviour'; and most importantly, create and naturalize criteria

of normality. Judged against these criteria, the adoptee is seen as deviant and highly susceptible to psychological problems. The problematic nature of their deviance is underpinned by theories of paediatrics and child psychology, which are considered as ensuing from the 'real' nature of humans, assessed by objective scientific methods and therefore true, universal and beyond politics. In light of a naturalized mother-child bond, the adoptee is imagined as snatched away from that

natural union and therefore assumed to experience severe problems. In other words, the very fact of being adopted is seen as an important risk factor for psychological distress.

I will not deny that some adoptees must cope with traumatic experiences, but the current framework that is used for organizing selection, preparation and support of adoptive families, tends to pathologize adoption as such. Such a framework, that holds the adoptee 'hostage to adverse early childhood experiences' is, as Triseliotis and Hill argue, far 'too deterministic' and can have serious implications for adoptees and their families.

The economy of expertise influences and shapes the daily adoptive parenting work and the parents' conceptualization of their families', children's and their own identities. Prevailing 'intensive' parenting ideologies –that, as Hays highlighted, tell us 'that children are innocent and priceless, that their rearing should be carried out primarily by individual mothers and that it should be centred on children's needs, with methods that are informed by experts, and that are labour-intensive

and costly'– are invoked to justify the transfer of children from poor to rich families. Moreover, the global inequalities that are at the heart of transnational adoption produce incertitude and feelings of guilt and indebtedness that drive many adoptive parents into charity work as part of their intensive parenting practice.

Furthermore, intensive mothering ideology is pushed to extremes in adoption circles by dramatizing adoptive parenthood, conceptualizing it as in need of extraordinary measures (that extend beyond the measures prescribed by 'normal' parenting guidebooks). It urges adopters to become almost like social workers or therapists for their children. This dramatization carries the risk of reinforcing exclusionary mechanisms as well as domesticating difference. However, this extremely intensive parenting work tends to further underline adoptive children's and adoptive families' deviance from the aspired norm. It carries the risk of reinforcing essentialisms within the context of profound global inequalities, due to its articulation with ideas that define the 'true'



*Rastres i transparències*  
(Traces and transparencies)

needs of children in terms of exclusive parent-child bonds, and conceptualize the child's race as the mark of a different culture that both essentially belongs to and must be re-instilled in the child.

### **Adoptive parents' culture work**

One aspect of intensive adoptive parenting work is the engagement in the adoptive child's birth country, by for instance eating out in Ethiopian restaurants or attending concerts of Ethiopian musicians. The culture work is often performed in the context of adoptive parents' festive and/or charity gatherings. The focus on the parents' 'culture work' is particularly interesting as it poignantly reveals the battlefield of intersecting processes in which transnational adoptive families are shaped. It shows how culture is invoked for the negotiation of the children's otherness and how this invocation of culture interconnects with discourses of relatedness, identity and belonging. These cultural celebrations are shaped by prevailing ideas on culture and 'otherness' and they can turn

out to be empowering or rather exclusionary for black adoptive children.

There is a double orientation of the parents' work both to (1) establish the grounds for their children's citizenship by cultural empowerment and (2) establish themselves as middle-class, involved, cosmopolitan, open-minded, 'good' parents-citizens. The parents' culture work can be analysed as an example of what Kershaw refers to as 'caregiving for identity'. Kershaw

argues that the care work of minority caregivers shows that caregiving for identity can be considered as an expression of political citizenship. As such, he further challenges the public-private dichotomy that is underlying a traditional view on citizenship as something that is solely played out within the public sphere. By referencing Collins' work on women of colour who, through their care work, try to 'guard of their children against ubiq-

uitous messages that brand them as less valuable', he makes a powerful argument for considering caregiving for identity as 'quintessentially political', irrespective of where it is performed.

The adoptive parents' culture work can be interpreted in the same vein as it is part of the whole package of care work that the adoptive parents perform, encouraged by prevailing parenting ideologies and as a way of empowering their children. This care work extends beyond the private sphere of the nuclear family and beyond the provision of basic care to encompass the production of cultural practices, social values and identity. Although the parents' organizations are not in most of the cases activist political movements and their gatherings and events are located within the sphere of familial recreation and social life, their implication for the identity of parents and children turns the culture work into a political act.

The dominant adoption discourse that problematizes adopted children's identity on the one hand, and, though far less problematized, encounters with racism and racialization on the

*Dins l'escorça (Inside the bark)*



other, encourages adoptive parents to actively intervene in the children's identity. Parents assert that they want to arm their children against racism and offer them tools to construct a sound identity. The identity of transnationally adopted children is constructed against presuppositions with regard to physical characteristics that are supposed to signal someone's belonging to a certain ethnical background; and against and as part of a society that views identity as singular. The children's life trajectory as well as their physiognomy disturb essentialist views of ethnic identity and a homogeneous concept of citizenship. Within adoption cultures alternative identities for the child are considered and discussed. The limits of assimilation are explored in light of a society in which difference is problematized. Different views of culture and identity circulate among parents, are discussed, criticized, are tested by their everyday experiences and are adjusted in one way or another.

However, the parents' and their children's specific position at the intersection of different layers of privilege



*Frontalitat endins*

and exclusion, in conjunction with a discourse of intensive parenting that tends both to challenge and to support the status quo, result in a very ambivalent practice. On the one hand it can offer the children alternative conceptualizations of identity and citizenship and can be interpreted as a form of resistance against exclusionary representations, but on the other hand it seems to be indicative of essentialist notions of identity and pathologization of the children's hybrid condition and

risks becoming embroiled in essentialist imageries that understand skin colour as a sign of non/belonging.

## REFLECTIONS

The prevalent discourse in adoption circles traces adoptees' (potential) identity problems to an individual, psychological struggle with their being relinquished on the one hand and their ability to attach to the new and non-biological family on the other. Problems of belonging are thus addressed at a personal or familial level, while the broader social context that has enabled the adoption in the first place and that works in exclusionary ways for the adoptee are not fully acknowledged. The embeddedness of the adoptees' experiences in a broader social context of (global) unequal power relations and deeply rooted racism is largely ignored.

As Yngvesson asserts, by placing the 'disturbance' in the adopted child itself, by almost exclusively explaining emotional problems in terms of early infancy trauma (and distancing them from the child's lived experiences of racism), parents and adoption professionals tend to ignore that the very whiteness of the parent, and the imaginations and exclusions that go with

it, may be a factor in producing the adopted child's disturbance. The mere focus on problems of belonging on a familial/personal level moves the responsibility to the adoptee him- or herself and as such, does not challenge the status quo that excludes the adoptee from full belonging on a broader, societal level.

The intertwining of the parents' discourse with paternalistic (neo)colonial imaginations of rescue, a colour-blind negation of race as an everyday lived reality, and consumerist modes of engaging in their children's birth country, run the risk of domesticating the global inequalities underlying transnational adoption. What Anagnost called 'celebratory representations of cultural difference', without acknowledging the lopsided global relations that make possible the transfer of children, tends to keep white parents in what Žižek calls 'the privileged empty point of universality' from which they respect other cultures, but at the same time assert their own superiority. The capacity of such re-



*Nit gelada (Frozen night)*

presentations for empowering the black adopted child is much more doubtful.

Note: This article is an adaptation of a text that will be published in *Afrika-Focus*, 2012, 25 (2).



## ...FURTHER READING

### Articles

Anagnost, Ann (2000). Scenes of misrecognition: Maternal citizenship in the age of transnational adoption. *Positions-East Asia Cultures Critique* 8 (2), p. 389-421.

Andersson, Malinda (2012). [Seeing through the white gaze: Racialized markings of \(un\)familiar bodies in Swedish transnational adoption policy](#). *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 9(1), p. 65-83.

Castañeda, Claudia (2011). [Adopting technologies: Producing race in trans-national adoption](#). *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 9 (1-2), p. 1-9.

De Graeve, Katrien (2010). The limits of intimate citizenship: Reproduction of difference in Flemish-Ethiopian 'adoption cultures'. *Bioethics*, 24,(7), p. 365-372.

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Tigervall, Carina, and Tobias Hübinette (2010). Adoption with complications: Conversations with adoptees and adoptive parents on everyday racism and ethnic identity. *International Social Work*, 53 (4), p. 489-509.

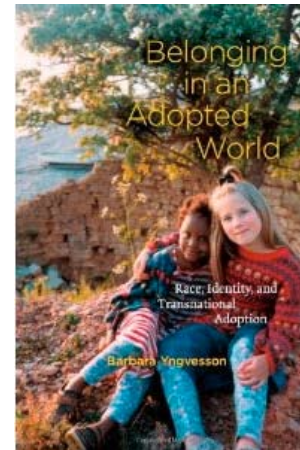
Volkman, Toby Alice (2003). Embodying Chinese culture: Transnational adoption in North America. *Social Text*, 21 (1), p. 29-55.

Yngvesson, Barbara (2012). Transnational Adoption and European Immigration Politics: Producing the National Body in Sweden. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 19 (1), p. 327-345.

### Books

[Belonging in an adopted world : Race, identity, and transnational adoption](#)

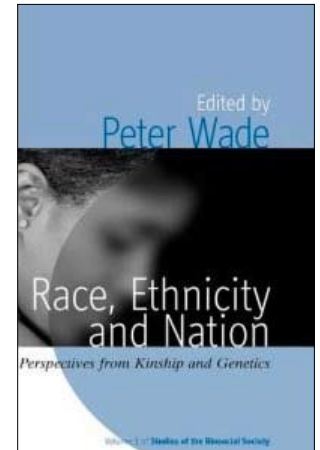
Yngvesson, Barbara  
Chicago; London:  
The University of  
Chicago Press,  
2010



Since the early 1990s, transnational adoptions have increased at an astonishing rate, not only in the United States, but worldwide. In *Belonging in an Adopted World*, Barbara Yngvesson offers a penetrating exploration of the consequences and implications of this unprecedented movement of children, usually from poor nations to the affluent West. Yngvesson illuminates how the politics of adoption policy has profoundly affected the families, nations, and children involved in this new form of social and economic migration.

[Race, ethnicity and nation : perspectives from kinship and genetics](#)

Wade, Peter  
New York:  
Berghahn Books,  
2007



*Race, ethnicity and nation* are all intimately linked to family and kinship, yet these links deserve closer attention than they usually get in social science, above all when family and kinship are changing rapidly in the context of genomic and biotechnological revolutions. Drawing on data from assisted reproduction, transnational adoption, mixed race families, Basque identity politics and post-Soviet nation-building, this volume provides new and challenging ways to understand race, ethnicity and nation.

*The cultural contradictions of motherhood*

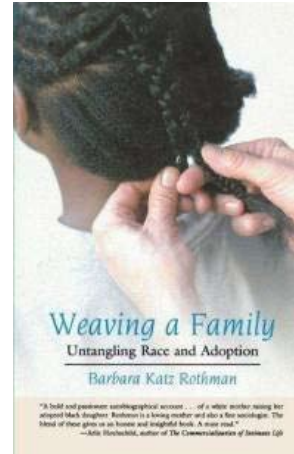
Hays, Sharon  
Yale University Press,  
1996



Working mothers today confront not only conflicting demands on their time and energy but also conflicting ideas about how they are to behave: they must be nurturing and unselfish while engaged in child rearing but competitive and ambitious at work. As more and more women enter the workplace, it would seem reasonable for society to make mothering a simpler and more efficient task. Instead, Sharon Hays points out in this original and provocative book, an ideology of "intensive mothering" has developed that only exacerbates the tensions working mothers face. Hays traces the evolution of the ideology of intensive mothering - an ideology that holds the individual mother primarily responsible for child rearing and dictates that the process is to be child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive.

*Weaving a family : Untangling race and adoption*

Rothman, Barbara Katz  
Boston: Beacon Press,  
2005



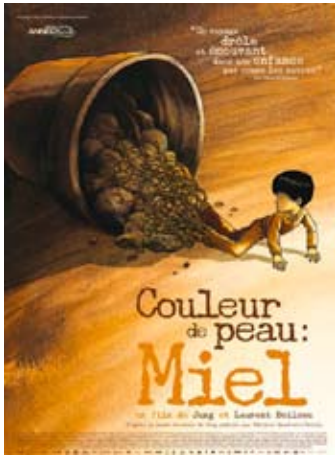
A man, a woman, and their biological children, all of the same race, the mythical "nuclear family" has been the bedrock of American cultural, religious, social, and economic life since the Revolutionary War, and even with all the changes we have absorbed in the last sixty years, it essentially remains so. Current trends in adoption, however, have begun to shift the dominant paradigm of the family in ways never before imagined. Professional estimates show that in the United States today, seven million families have been formed by adoption, and 700,000 of them are interracial. These still-growing numbers have begun to radically change the face of the traditional American family.

*Parenting in global perspective. Negotiating ideologies of kinship, self and politics*

Faircloth, Charlotte, Diane Hoffman y Linda L. Layne  
London: Routledge (to be published 26th  
March 2013)

*Parenting in Global Perspective* examines the significance of 'parenting' as a subject of professional expertise, and activity in which adults are increasingly expected to be emotionally absorbed and become personally fulfilled. By focusing the significance of parenting as a form of relationship and as mediated by family relationships across time and space, the book explores the points of accommodation and points of tension between parenting as defined by professionals, and those experienced by parents themselves.

## ...FURTHER VIEWING



### [Couleur de Peau: Miel](#) (Approved for Adoption)

Directed by: Laurent Boileau and Jung

France and Belgium, 2012

Length: 75 min.

The hybrid animation/documentary follows Jung as he goes back to Seoul for the first time since he was orphaned as a child, with the animated segments of the film used to depict his memories of growing up in Belgium with his adopted parents.

[Trailer](#)

## FUTURE EVENTS

[Infancia y envejecimiento poblacional en los Espacios Urbanos Actuales](#). Barcelona, 11th December 2012. Facultad de Geo-grafía e Historia. Universitat de Barcelona.

[Young Sexualities Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Conference](#). Cardiff University, 25th January, 2013.

### Call for papers

[4 ICAR: International Conferences on Adoption Research](#). Bilbao, 7-11 de July 2013. *Call for papers deadline*: 15th December 2012.

[Rutgers Media Studies Conference: Extending Play](#). 19-20 April 2013. Livingston Student Center. USA.

[Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World: Historical Perspectives](#). Londres, 19th July 2013. *Call for papers deadline*: 31st December 2012. Shirleene. robinson@mq.edu.au y Simon. sleight@kcl.ac.uk.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE TEXTS

### Katrien De Graeve

holds a master degree in African Languages and Cultures and a PhD in Comparative Sciences of Culture at Ghent University, Belgium. In May 2012, she defended her thesis called "Making Families". Parenting and Belonging in Transnational Adoption in Flanders'. Her research interests are situated at the intersection of critical kinship and family studies and the anthropology of migration and postcoloniality.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

### Assumpció Mateu

was born in Girona in 1952. In 1970 she began studying painting at the School of Fine Arts Sant Jordi in Barcelona, which ended in 1975, while studying Graphic Design in Elisava that was in the same city. Since 1979 she dedicated to teaching as a professor of painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Sant Jordi University of Barcelona.

In 1988 Mateu obtained the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts from the University of Barcelona, with the thesis "Perception: Color and Thought." That same year, he published the book "La Veu del Foc" by M. Mercè Roca, inspired by the person and work of the artist. Shortly afterwards, Mateu, decides to devote herself to creating leaving teaching. She currently works in his studio in Barcelona and Jafre (the Lower Empordà).

Visit his work at her website [www.assumpciomateu.com](http://www.assumpciomateu.com) and her blog [www.assumpciomateu.com/wordpress](http://www.assumpciomateu.com/wordpress).